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ABSTRACT

The production of a book review journal by students is suggested as a way of encouraging reading and of developing clear, expository writing. Guidelines are provided for the sequential development of such a journal. Criteria are offered for evaluating fiction and nonfiction books, with examples of annotations featuring style, period or setting of a novel, theme, plot, characterization, structure, spirit of the book, and illustrations. Brief discussions and examples are offered on the writing of annotations, abstracts, and literary notes. Suggestions are made for the layout and production of a book review journal as a class project. (JD)

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CREATING A MINI BOOK REVIEW JOURNAL

Valeria Hitt

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The Mini Book Review Journal - an Overview

Too often the emotional impact experienced by a student while reading a good book is lost when it must be shared by means of a traditionally written book report. Such a routine account may be produced from a cursory examination of Chapter One or by a hasty reading of the publisher's description on the dust jacket. By imitating a real life situation, the production of the Book Review Journal, students will be stimulated to write thoughtful evaluations. These book reports, written in the style of the reviewer's annotation, will be combined in a Mini Journal, planned and produced entirely by students. Distribution can be to readers within the school, within the school district - possibly trading with a sister school - or as hand-outs through the public library. A summary journal of the best reviews of the year could be distributed to a larger audience by means of an announcement in a national library journal, such as "The School Library Journal". A fee would be requested from subscribers to cover postage and production costs if distribution were on a national basis.

Production of the Mini Book Review Journal would result in improved writing skills, an understanding of evaluative criteria and even a glimpse into the career of a book reviewer. Finally, there would be a feeling of increased self worth for the students who produced it when their Review Journal went "to press" and was distributed to reading peers. Writing for publication would offer an incentive to read the entire book, to analyze and evaluate it carefully. Annotation writing demands, not only careful judgment but also concise writing. An awareness of evaluative criteria would demand consideration of literary style, moral values, age appeal, and so forth.

The material presented can be varied to meet the needs of children with different reading abilities. As written here, the material demands a student of superior reading ability, and offers this type of student a challenge.

The same idea - producing an annotation like a book reviewer does - can be presented to a lower level reading group by restricting the annotation. Simply determine the main idea or theme of the book and write it in simple language. The student must tell what the book is about, not what happened. Children at these lower reading levels will enjoy illustrating their materials. One class used the opaque projector to produce illustrated, oral book talks as well as written annotations.

In order to satisfy the demand for a thorough understanding of the book read, a Librarian's Note can be produced. This note can be condensed by the student into a Reader's Note. Both types of notes can be used in the finished journal.

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EVALUATING A BOOK

Evaluation begins with the reading of the book. It helps if you are interested in the book and the subject matter. It's difficult to be a fair and equitable judge of a book's quality if you don't want to read it and consider reading it an unpleasant task.

Give the book a chance! Be open-minded: allow the author to have a view differing from your own.

Keep a pencil handy and make notes, if only a page number that will help you decide about the book's character and quality. Watch for errors or exaggeration. You have to be sympathetic to discover a book's good points, but you must also watch for exaggerations, omissions, and misstatements to write an accurate evaluation!

Criteria for Evaluation

(Examples are from annotations in the ALA Booklist, a book review journal)

I. STYLE. Style describes the way the book is written. Is it graceful? monotonous? commonplace? unusual? Try to appreciate and define the style.

Example: Bodker, Cecil. Silas and the black mare.
Bodker's writing is sure and vivid...

Example: Bacon, Martha. Moth Manor.
The slow, Victorian style beginning, with lengthy descriptive passages, picks up with the entrance of contemporary Monica, at which point the plot also tightens into a suspenseful, fast-paced tale.

Example: Pollock, Rollene. Flying wheels.
A fast-breaking, action-packed story about Kevin Donovan, who works at a gas station...

Example: Willard, Nancy. The island of the grass king.
...a one-plot story that shimmers with sparkling writing but suffers from an overload of magical happenings...

II. SETTING OR PERIOD. Setting is the time and place in which the events of a narrative occur. Note setting exactly when reading a novel.

Example: Wildsmith, Alan. The northern phantom.
In a Yorkshire mining village in 1947, a huge hole from an old mine

shaft appears on a school playground.

Example: Gardner, John E. The dancing dodo.
In 1976 a World War II airplane with six bodies inside - all carrying identification of men who are still alive --is discovered in an English marsh...

III. SUBJECT OR THEME. Theme refers to the underlying principle or meaning - ie: racial prejudice or jealousy.

Example: Strang, Celia. Foster Mary.
The "we're poor but happy" theme is driven home too hard via the mouthings of gold-hearted Aunt Foster Mary, whose well-loved children are other people's castoffs...

IV. PLOT. Plot is the skeleton of the story: the significant pattern of action.

Example: Wolkstein, Diane and Young, Ed.,.White Wave.
A mystical story in which a poor young farmer finds a snail shell housing the moon goddess White Wave, who keeps house for him as long he keeps his distance but disappears when he forgets what he knew - not to touch her...

Example: Albery, Nobuko. Balloon top.
The first half of Albery's novel depicts a typical, privileged girl's childhood in post-war Japan, the second her coming of age in the turbulent anti-U.S. sixties...

If the title subtly covers the theme of the story, explain its meaning.

Example: Horsburgh, Peg. Living light: exploring bioluminescence.
Bioluminescence is defined as "living light found in nature" and is explored in its variety of occurrence.

Example: De Paola, Thomas. Oliver Button is a sissy.
...Although taunts from other boys, teasing about his tap shoes, and writing on the school wall ("Oliver Button is a sissy") make him unhappy, he perserveres.

V. CHARACTERIZATION. Characterization is the way a character is developed or described. Do the characters come to life, move, speak and feel as individual human beings? Are they carefully composed types? The understanding, all-patient mother or the arch villian. Are the characters artificial?

Example: Smucker, Barbara Classen. Runaway to freedom: a story of the Underground Railway.
...while the characters fall entirely into the realm of archetypal representatives of the powers of good versus evil...

Example: Colman, Hila. Tell me no lies.
...Angela's close relationship with her mother - one that holds despite Angela's initial outrage at the lie she's faced with - is nicely done, and her own turmoil, a mix of legitimate anger and self-indulgent righteousness, is believable in concept and in bettersweet resolution.

VI. STRUCTURE. Is the book long, rambling, elaborate or well-knit or highly compressed?

Example: Adkins, Jan. Moving on: stories of four travelers.
...Spare descriptive prose creates a compact tale...

VII. SPIRIT OF THE BOOK. What is the spirit of the book? Is it humorous, somber, passionate? Does it truly reflect the phase of life it describes?

Example: Aitken, Amy. Ruby!
Rifkin's story is a marvel in sustained tension...

VIII. ILLUSTRATIONS. Are they clear, appropriate to the SPIRIT of the story, and placed near the text which describes the subject of the picture?

Example: Maiorano, Robert. Francisco.
Refined ink drawings full of soft stipple and crosshatches make a darkly delicate background for this rather somber story of Francisco, whose home is in the Dominican Republic.

Example: Lawson, Joan. Ballet stories.
...The photographs, often overly dark to the extent of obliterating background detail and sometimes even costume, are in a couple of instances badly placed (a scene from Coppelia appears amid the story of The Nutcracker) but still generally add to the action...

Fiction vs Nonfiction

To review nonfiction, you must have some knowledge of the subject of the book. Nonfiction books need a table of contents, an index and a bibliography. Mention the author's qualifications. Indicate the theme of the book, compare it to other books in the same field if possible, and point out its literary quality. The following annotation describes the author and also conveys the subject of the book:

> The veteran archeologist, whose work in Yucatan was described in Williard's City of the Sacred Well, tells the story of forty years' study of Mayan ruins.

Taken from the ALA Booklist:

> Gervasi, Frank Henry. The life and times of Menahem Begin. Gervasi has been familiar with the career of Begin and the evolution of Israel since the 1940's; his biography of the Israeli prime minister is, additionally, a history of the domestic issues and international diplomacy that accompanied the birth of the Jewish state...

This annotation indicates literary quality.

> Masson, Madeleine. I never kissed Paris goodbye. ...All in all, her experiences are certainly worth sharing; in addition, she writes spiritedly.

Here the reviewer indicates bibliography:

> Thomas, Emory M. The Confederate Nation. ...Notes, bibliography, and the text of the Confederate constitution appended.

Fiction is more difficult than nonfiction to annotate. Read it, and enjoy it (if possible) and try to analyze the impression it has made on you. Fiction is a creative piece of work: try to be creative when you describe it. We need not defend an author's qualifications or knowledge of his subject when describing a fiction book. Consider the list of criteria to watch for. Of course you won't be able to include them all in your annotation, even if it's a lone one. The criteria list should serve as a guide of things to watch for as you read.

If you are reviewing a book, you necessarily are critical and must often condemn. If you have negative criticism, show that you have thought carefully, and that you have reached your decision based on reasonable analysis.

Some books have special points of interest that should be mentioned, for example, the SETTING is in Atlanta (a local setting!), they are timely (about the new president of the U.S. or are on a subject popular with your society (such as on school problems or on adolescence). Such books may be appealing even though they have no other merit. They are simply valuable

because they serve a special interest. Be sure to mention these special points of interest in the books you review.

ANNOTATION WRITING

An annotation is a brief paragraph which gives a clear, accurate, interesting summary of the book's qualities and characteristics. There are two kinds of annotations: Reader's notes and Librarian's notes. These are written by professional writers employed by book review magazines, by librarians and by interested volunteers. Writing this type of short description requires much practice and skill. To see some examples of professional book annotations, look at the brief notes found on book jackets.

Types of Annotations

I. LIBRARIAN'S NOTES

Librarian's notes are longer (50 - 90 words) than reader's notes. They criticize and compare books with similar ones so that librarians can decide which ones to purchase. They go into some depth in their description and criticism. Theme, setting, plot interest, literary quality, style, characterization, and reading appeal (who would be interested in the book? what age group?) MIGHT be mentioned in this longer annotation. It might begin with a vivid statement of the book's theme or setting and then mention what appears to be the book's strongest value. It might be its emotional impact (a sense of peace; terror or humor). Its value might be in the descriptions or in the life-like characters the author has created. The following annotation starts with setting and theme:

> Example: Masson, Madeleine. <u>I never kissed Paris goodbye</u>.
> Before World War II, Masson led the kind of exotic life that is delicious to read about: born into a comfortable French family residing in South Africa, she went to Paris as a young woman, married a baron, and was included in fast and fascinating circles.

Mention the persons whom you feel would be attracted to the book at the end of the annotation.

Example: Werner, Herma. The dragster.
In search of a carburetor for the old Chevy he's turning into a dragster, Greg goes to a local junkyard, where he spots Hank Turner and some others busily stripping a new car. Later Hank offers Greg the auto part he needs if he will set up the local cop for a bribe. Although he refuses to help...he lands in a great deal more trouble than he anticipated. Teenagers will be attracted to the young hero, whose desire to drag race may symbolize their own.

II. READERS' NOTES:

Readers' notes are SHORTER and NON-CRITICAL. Their purpose is to give information to readers to make them wish to read the book. The aim is to fit the book to the reader who will enjoy it, or explain the book's value to a serious reader. A readers' note is only 15-25 words, requiring the reviewer to condense his writing. Every word must count. The shorter the annotation, the more difficult it is to convey a description of the whole book and not one part.

Writing the Note

Condensation is a skill and an art that is developed only with practice. Examine annotations written by professionals and then practice some yourself. As you read the book, decide what the main theme or idea is. Then try to write about that theme using good grammar and sentence structure. You may not use phrases or incomplete sentences. And never divulge the ending: you may only hint.

Example:... Tightly constructed, disaster laden scenes...zestfully carry along the plot to its satisfying conclusions.

1. Compress each sentence to give a specific, definite fact.

Example: London, Mel. Getting into film.
An award-winning film maker shares the inside dope on career opportunities in all aspects of the film industry.

2. Try to show color, texture, spirit of the book.

Example: Leitner, Isabella. Fragments of Isabella: a memoir of Auschwitz. The strength of human spirit and the passionate will to survive the degradation and death of Auschwitz are portrayed with searing intensity through Leitner's fragmented memories.

3. Use simple language: choose words carefully for their vividness and fitness. Avoid overused phrases and threadbare adjectives like "good", "fine", and "great".

Example: Levenkron, Steven. The best little girl in the world.

Obsessive dieting and bizarre rituals with food are symptons of Francesca's battle with anorexia nervosa in a novel about the strange psychological disorder that afflicts one out of every 300 teenage girls.

4. Find the word or words that convey the book's style or the essence of its theme. (A thesaurus is your best friend!)

Example: Brodsky, Beverly. Secret places.

Watery, optimistic hues keep Brodsky's meditative text from being too somber...

You can omit the subject when it is the title of the book or omit "this book" and start the sentence with a verb.

Example: "Describes a journey to Mexico..."
"Tells the story of American relations..."

Do not refer unnecessarily to the author.

Example: "The author's aim..."

Articles and prepositions may be omitted in the middle of a sentence; commas may be used to indicate words omitted.

Annotations are frequently misleading when they try to attract attention and arouse enthusiasm. Don't go overboard trying to urge the reader to choose the book.

Example: "To read this book is to join the greatest adventure in history."

This annotation tells us nothing about the book. Using the same number of words: "Brilliant, dramatic, ironic picture of period centering on portrait of Napolean III"

gives much more information.

Read as many annotations as possible and then practice condensing the longer Librarians' note into shorter Readers' notes. You will need to practice to develop real skill.

Practice in "boiling down" or condensing.

Condensation is a skill and an art that is developed only with practice. Read the annotations on the following pages which have been written by professional reviewers. They are Readers' notes. Then look at the pages of Librarians' notes that follow. Can you boil down and condense these librarians' notes to readers' notes of 15-25 words? Even though much information is given, it is impossible to truly know the book unless you read it!

Librarians' notes (to be condensed into readers' notes)

I... Rifkin, Shepard. McQuaid in August.

Rifkin's story is a marvel in sustained tension: New York homocide detective Damian McQuaid, a very smart and very human cop, gets romantically involved with the victim of a crack caller, falls asleep on her couch, and wakes to find her strangled in the next room. Because of the suspicious circumstances of his being so close to a murder, McQuaid must solve the crime before Homicide is alerted. Rifkin never lets his tale get bogged down by police-routine detail, instead using his knowledge of procedure to spice the plot. The novel's climax, a chess match played between McQuaid and the murderer, is one of the finest and most anxiety-provoking confrontations in detective fiction. A superior cop story.

II. De Bottazzi, Ana Maria Trenchi. To live again.

From the age of two, Ana Maria was groomed by her mother to be a concert pianist. At 23, after a successful European tour, she was about to make her American debut when she was involved in a car accident and suffered brain damage. Her straightforward autobiography chronicles the following 13 years of struggle that finally led to success. Her memories of pre- and post-accident events illustrate not only her determination and faith but also a single-minded passion for music. What she suffered throughout her life to be a concert-caliber pianist will best be appreciated by artistically inclined teenagers.

III... Gardner, John E. The dancing dodo.

In 1976 a World War II airplane with six bodies inside-all carrying identification of men who are still alive- is discovered in an English marsh. The mystery and danger quicken as RAF Wing Commander David Dobson and USAF Colonel Bud Hackstead investigate nebulous clues that hark back to Nazi Germany and a plot to unleash virulent germs on London - a plot that seems

still extant as possible witnesses are killed and Dobson and his fiancee are brutally attacked by what looks and smells like rotting corpses in disintegrating USAF uniforms. A gripping, plausibly developed adult novel of intrigue that will hold readers to the last page.

IV... Bodker, Cecil. Silas and the black mare.

Silas, a runaway from the circus, exhibits cool intelligence and extraordinary self-possession as he bests the nefarious horse trader, Bartolin in a wager for Bartolin's prize black mare. The horse is not long his, however, as the farmer Emmanuel drugs Silas and divests him of his prize: the mare will fetch a handsome price from traders and raise needed tax money. In the end Silas moves boldly to reclaim his mare; but for the interim, he must depend on wit to get by in this poverty-stricken, corrupt environment where survival is in direct proportion to strength. Bodker's writing is sure and vivid ("He watched her for a long time, arms dangling helplessly, a whole nestful of muffled curses escaping through his beard"), the story sharpened by an array of bleak, hardbitten characters who collide over Silas' mare. Silas himself is an arresting blend of insolence, cruelty and gentleness; his triumph in reclaiming the mare and the open future he faces with new friend Ben-Godik are bright spots in this darkly envisioned world where integrity is at a premium. Strong, satisfying stuff.

V... Alexander, Lloyd. The first two lives of Lukas-Kasha.

In a wonderfully nimble, multilevel fantasy Alexander presents the exotic fortunes of Lukas-Kasha, who, in submitting to a showman's bid to aid in a magic act, is thrust into another world. The land is Abadan, and there Lukas is forthwith declared King, a delightful state of affairs to begin with, but one that grows ever more hazardous as Lukas begins to exercise his royal perogative. An oily Grand Vizier is his archenemy; a forthright captive girl from the neighboring, gem-rich kingdom of Bishangari is his regal benefactor, as Lukas, who was a resourceful layabout in his old world puts his wits to use in outfoxing the murderous Vizier bent on conquering the Bishangaris. Conventions in dialogue and plot and in the sage triumph of good over evil make a sturdy framework for Alexander to hoist notions of morality and positive existence. A most clever, humorous, and soulfully satisfying story.

Readers' Notes taken from ALA Booklist follow. Read these and other professionally prepared notes to become familiar with good style.

Angell, Judie.
Ronnie and Rosey. 1977. Bradbury, $7.95.
Ronnie, a girl, and Rosey, a boy, form a close friendship, especially after the death of the girl's father. Gr. 5-7.

Barford, Carol.
Let me hear the music. 1979. Seabury, $7.95.
A whole family is affected by the death of Ryn's friend Bennie in a small Wisconsin town after the Depression. Gr. 5-7.

Beatty, Patricia.
By crumbs, it's mine! 1976. Morrow, $6.95.
Damaris Boyd and her family move into a run-down hotel and experience life in the Arizona Territory in 1852. Gr. 6-8.

Bonsall, Crosby.
The goodbye summer. 1979. Greenwillow, $6.95.
Allie discovers some new aspects of friendship from an eccentric woman who comes to live at her mother's boarding house. Gr. 4-6.

Branscum, Robbie.
The saving of P.S. 1977. Doubleday, $5.95.
Priscilla learns a lesson in adjustment when her father, a preacher, begins to court a pretty widow. Gr. 5-7.

Calhoun, Mary.
Katie John. 1960. Harcourt, $5.75; paper, $1.95.
In spite of her fears, Katie finds fun and friendship awaiting her during a summer in a small southern town. Followed by Honestly, Katie John. Gr. 4-6.

Cleary, Beverly.
Ramona and her father. 1977. Morrow, $6.50; Dell, paper, $1.75.
In this sequel to Ramona the Pest, Ramona and her family face the problems of father's losing his job. A warm and funny story, followed by Ramona and Her Mother, also about the dynamics of family life.

Cleaver, Vera and Cleaver, Bill.
Where the lilies bloom. 1977. Lippincott, $7.95.
Mary Call schemes to keep the family together, honoring a promise she made to her father at his death. Gr. 6-9.

Clifton, Lucille.
Everett Anderson's friend. 1976. Holt, $5.95.
Though Everett's new neighbor beats him at races, she proves a good friend when he loses his house key and needs to wait until his mother's return. Gr. 1-3

Cohen, Barbara.
Benny. 1977. Lothrop, $6.
Twelve-year-old Benny assumes added family responsibilities when his mother enters the hospital for surgery. Gr. 4-6.

Colman, Hila.
Nobody has to be a kid forever. 1976. Crown, $4.94; Archway, paper, $1.25
A happy ending brightens Sarah's thirteenth year despite her father's losing his job and her mother's leaving home. Gr. 6-8.

Conford, Ellen.
And this is Laura. 1977. Little, Brown, $5.75; Archway, paper, $1.25.
Laura discovers that her family loves her for what she is and not because she has the talent of seeing into the future. Gr. 5-8.

Conford, Ellen.
Felicia the critic. 1973. Little, Brown, $5.75; Archway, paper, $1.25.
Felicia's honesty irritates her friends and family and gets her into trouble when she only means to be constructive. Gr. 4-6.

Cresswell, Helen.
Ordinary Jack: being the first part of the Bagthorpe saga. 1977. Macmillan, $6.96
An eccentric, hilarious family in which everyone is precocious except Jack. Followed by Absolute Zero and Bagthorpes Unlimited. Gr. 6-8

Danziger, Paula.
Can you sue your parents for malpractice? 1979. Delacorte, $7.95.
Fourteen-year-old Lauren copes with losing her boyfriend, finding a new one who is too young, and fitting into a family in which father and three daughters seem constantly at odds. Funny dialogue lights up some common concerns. Gr. 6-9.

Estes, Eleanor.
The Moffats. 1941. Harcourt. $6.50; paper, $2.95.
The lively adventures of four children, their family, and friends. Sequels: Middle Moffat and Rufus M. Gr. 3-5.

Fitzhugh, Louise.
Nobody's family is going to change. 1974. Farrar, $7.95; Dell, paper, $1.50.
A middle-class black family suffers misunderstanding but also experiences humor and warmth. Gr. 5-8.

Gilson, Jamie.
Harvey the beer can king. 1978. Lothrop, $5.95.
A local superboy contest inspires Harry to compete against a crackin' good skateboarder. Gr. 5-7.

Gordon, Shirley.
Crystal is the new girl. 1976. Harper, $4.95.
A new girl with a kooky sense of humor wins over the reluctant and quieter Susan. Followed by Crystal Is My Friend. Gr. 1-3.

Greene, Constance.
A girl called Al. 1969. Viking, $5.95; Dell, paper, $1.25.
Two seventh graders and their apartment superintendent share an unusual and humorous friendship. Gr. 5-7.

Greenfield, Eloise.
Sister. 1974. T. Y. Crowell, $5.50.
After her father dies, a black girl watches her sister withdraw but slowly grows herself in understanding and maturity. Gr. 5-7.

Greenwald, Sheila.
The secret in Miranda's closet. 1977. Houghton, $6.95; Scholastic Book Services, paper, 95¢
Miranda, who has a secret love for dolls and dollhouses, has an ardent feminist for a mother, yet the two find an avenue for understanding. Gr. 3-5.

Hamilton, Virginia.
M.C. Higgins the great. 1974. Macmillan, $6.95.
A loving black family living in Appalachia fear a possible mountain slide will threaten their home. Gr. 6-8.

Herman, Charlotte.
Our snowman has olive eyes. 1977. Dutton. $6.50.
The touching story of a family whose lives are changed when an elderly grandmother comes to live with them. Gr. 5-7.

Hurwitz, Johanna.
The law of gravity. 1978. Morrow. $6.95.
A funny story about a girl's attempts to rid her mother of her irrational fears about leaving their fifth-floor apartment. Gr. 3-5.

Johnston, Norma.
The keeping days. 1973. Atheneum. $6.95
Fourteen year-old Tish Sterling relates the vicissitudes of growing up in a close family with individual differences at the turn of the century. Followed by Glory in the Flower and The Sanctuary Tree. Gr. 6-8.

Kibbe, Pat.
The hocus-pocus dilemma. 1979. Knopf; dist. by Random, $5.75.
The young narrator is confident that she has ESP and uses her powers to predict some very funny family escapades. Gr. 4-6.

Langton, Jane.
The boyhood of Grace Jones. 1972. Harper, $6.50; paper, $1.50.
Grace and her friends weather the perils and pitfalls of junior high. Sequel to Her Majesty, Grace Jones. Gr. 4-6.

PLANNING THE LAYOUT

Give the bibliographic data, author and title, for each book reviewed; then follow with the annotation.

Arrange the annotations according to themes or topics: sports books, romances, adventures. Have a contest among the students to devise unusual theme titles for each of the sections.

Have the "reviewers" determine a general title that could apply to all the journal entries. A title might be Winners, Books to be Read at 3 a. m., or I'd Rather Be Reading. When you've selected a clever title for your journal, design an appropriate cover with appealing illustrations and lettering. Use colored paper. If you're using ditto masters for the printing, try different colors, combining them for a two color format. Ask your art teacher to suggest new, unusual materials.

Ask students to submit illustrations to be used for cover and topic section designs. Be sure to place illustrations near appropriate annotations. Select only the best pictures for use in the completed journal.

To develop the most attractive format, maintain simplicity in layout. Use a few appropriate illustrations and parallel construction throughout the journal, e.g. use all two column layout or enclose all the pictures in frames.

Allow margins and some "white space". Don't try to fill every space with illustrations or printing. Open areas (white space) are needed to give greater impact to the illustrations and blocks of printing.

Look critically at each page to determine whether it is in balance. Are there too many pictures on one side? Is all the white space at the bottom or top?

Before the final printing, have several people proof read your journal for errors. Take time to examine all pages; critically; then let it go to press.